

Washington Post shrugs its shoulders over torture victim case

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The response of the *Washington Post* to the case of Syrian-Canadian Maher Arar sheds additional light on the indifference to democratic rights that prevails within the American political and media establishment.

Arar was detained by US authorities in New York in September 2002 on suspicion of terrorism, apparently on the basis of information provided by Canadian security officials. He was deported to Syria, where he was held in solitary confinement, beaten and tortured for 10 months.

Having found no evidence that he was involved in any illegal activity, the Syrians eventually released Arar. His case has become an international scandal because it underscores the contempt of the Bush administration for elementary rights and international law and exposes essential realities about the “war on terrorism.”

In particular, it provides a concrete example of Washington’s practice of seizing terrorist “suspects” and deporting them, without the benefit of any judicial procedure or legal representation, and without even having been charged of a crime, to various countries where American officials know they will be subjected to torture.

To the editors of the *Washington Post*, however, the case is primarily of concern because it has given the Bush regime and its policies something of a black eye.

A November 9 editorial, “Freedom vs. Torture?” is written entirely from the point of view of the US security apparatus and its concerns. Describing the supposed dilemma of American officials at the time of Arar’s detention at JFK airport, the *Post* comments, “After reportedly concluding that they lacked evidence to charge him with a crime, they decided to deport him. And faced with a choice between democratic Canada, where he would presumably remain free, and

totalitarian Syria, which could be expected to lock him up and torture him, authorities chose the latter.”

The *Post* deems this practice of “subcontracting torture” to be “morally repugnant.” That, however, is the extent of its criticism. The editors never declare their opposition in principle to the use of physical coercion.

Nor do the editors express any particular sympathy for Arar or hostility toward the injustice to which he has been subjected. They are remarkably nonchalant about his fate, as though the 33-year-old telecommunications engineer had been inconvenienced by a mistakenly issued parking ticket.

In fact, thanks to US and Canadian authorities, Arar was held in what he describes as “a grave,” which “had no light.” He continues: “It was three feet wide, it was six feet deep, it was seven feet high. I spent 10 months and 10 days in that grave.” During that time Arar was reportedly beaten on every part of his body with a frayed electrical cable and regularly threatened with electric-shock torture.

After noting the “repugnance” of subcontracted torture, the *Post* editorial continues, without skipping a beat: “But saying that much is the easy part. The harder question is what should be done with a suspected al Qaeda associate in such circumstances. Sending Mr. Arar to Canada, as a practical matter, meant setting him free, since there was little prospect of bringing charges there either. Authorities faced this choice: torture in Syria or freedom on the other side of the longest undefended border in the world.”

That Arar was arbitrarily detained and has never been charged, much less convicted, of a crime is obviously a matter of indifference to the *Post*. The encroachment of police-state methods and the accompanying mentality has reached a point where it does not even occur to the

Post editors to refer to the constitutional principle of presumption of innocence.

The “difficult part” for the *Post* editors is not the ominous and far-reaching implications of such practices for the democratic rights of all peoples, including Americans. Nor is it the need for a thorough and public investigation and the criminal indictment and punishment of those responsible for such crimes. Neither is there any suggestion that Arar should be paid reparations by the US.

The “difficult part” is the problem of how best—i.e., with the least diplomatic fallout—to “disappear” individuals suspected, on whatever grounds, of terrorist activities or sympathies.

The editorial continues: “If credible intelligence linked him to al Qaeda, Mr. Arar could have been designated an enemy combatant and held at Guantanamo Bay. The trouble with this solution is that the legal process given alleged enemy combatants is so opaque and unfair.... Were there some publicly understood process for handling these cases, so that sending a suspected enemy combatant to Guantanamo was not the same as dumping him into a legal black hole, authorities would have an option for people such as Mr. Arar other than torture in Syria and freedom in Canada.”

Thus the editorial concludes with friendly advice to those responsible for the abduction and torture of Arar and others like him to eliminate the most blatant legal abuses at the Guantanamo prison camp so as to make the facility a more effective and acceptable holding pen for suspected opponents of the US government.

It is worth recalling, as an illustration of the lurch to the right in the American media and the erosion within the political establishment of any commitment to democratic rights, that the *Post* was the newspaper that led the investigation into the Watergate scandal in the early 1970s. In the face of fierce White House resistance and obstruction, its reporters exposed the antidemocratic and criminal methods employed by Richard Nixon against his political opponents, laying bare the dangers of authoritarian rule. The Republican president was eventually forced to resign in disgrace.

A good deal of water has flown under the bridge since 1974. The Bush administration came to power by hijacking a national election, a fact which the *Post* and the rest of the American media have sought to bury in

their effort to boost the legitimacy of this unelected government.

Bush has continued to rule through criminality and fraud. He lied to the American people, as everyone in the media knows, to drag the country into an illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq and has carried out wholesale attacks on democratic rights, laying the basis for a police state in the US. And the *Post*—along with the entire media establishment—barely bats an eye.

The *Washington Post* editorial provides a vivid illustration of a basic political truth. Support for an imperialist foreign policy and defense of democratic rights are mutually exclusive. Those who endorse colonial wars—involving the enslavement of peoples around the globe—are inevitably led to sanction the suppression of the basic rights of the population at home.



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